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NEWS RELEASE

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NEZ PERCE COUNTY BENEFITS FROM \$44.7 MILLION DOLLAR INVESTMENT FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & WELFARE

Last year, Nez Perce County residents and businesses received \$44.7 million from Department of Health & Welfare programs that help people in need. The investment benefits every one of the county's 38,000 residents. Of Idaho's 44 counties, Nez Perce County ranks number 5 in per capita outlay of Health & Welfare dollars.

The disbursement of state and federal tax dollars amounts to \$1,186 for every man, woman and child residing in Nez Perce County. This includes citizens who may not receive a single direct service from the Department. The statewide average is \$839 per capita.

The Department distributed \$1.15 billion in Idaho communities in 2004. These funds came from Medicaid, additional payments to hospitals, Food Stamps, the Idaho Child Care Program, the Women, Infants and Children nutritional program, foster care and a variety of other assistance programs.

"This is an investment for all Nez Perce County residents," says Health & Welfare Director Karl Kurtz. "These are tax dollars put to good use because they are used to help people become healthy and productive. This money goes go to foster care for children in crisis, substance abuse treatment for adults and adolescents, improvements and operations at the local hospital, and dozens of other badly needed services."

"This is as much about sustaining communities as it is investing," adds Kurtz. "By providing programs that support people, we are helping communities and their residents build the endurance and strength they need to remain vital. Everyone profits from this investment, not just those who use Department programs. This isn't just me pounding my chest. That's what community leaders tell us."

Nez Perce County Commission Chairman Ron Wittman says, “As far as I’m concerned every dollar that comes into the county to help residents is great. The money is going where it needs to go. Medicaid absolutely helps a lot to take pressure off our indigent care fund.”

In 2004, the Department’s Medicaid Division spent \$37.8 million on health care for residents of the county — \$1.3 million more than in 2003. Total Medicaid spending in the county was \$40.8 million because many people from other counties travel to Lewiston for medical care.

A large share of the dollars go to drug stores like Orchard’s Pharmacy in Lewiston. “Medicaid is 30 percent of our business. We do about 1,200 prescriptions a week. If we lost a third of that — you can imagine. I would probably lose two or maybe three employees,” says owner Laura Heitzman. “We’re a small independent pharmacy. We are a neighborhood pharmacy. I think we’re pretty important to people around us, including non-Medicaid folks. The Medicaid clientele is a very strong base for us.”

The story is much the same at St. Joseph Regional Medical Center. In addition to regular inpatient and outpatient fees paid to the hospital, Medicaid also made a payment of \$497,000 in Disproportionate Share (DSH). The extra payment compensates hospitals for a larger than average number of Medicaid patients. The extra money can be used for any purpose so anyone using the hospital can potentially benefit from those dollars.

“It’s really important,” says Chief Financial Officer Doug Johnson. “We are a trauma center that handles a wide area. The complex cases come here and they utilize a higher number of dollars. DSH helps make up the difference. Without it, we would have to evaluate services in terms of whether we could offer the same level or need to cut back. I would like to see DSH monies increased. The reimbursement is critical.” All Medicaid payments to the hospital totaled \$6.2 million.

Nez Perce County residents received \$2.9 million in Food Stamps to help feed their families — \$500,000 more than in 2003. The Food Stamp program served 2,900 county residents in 2004 — 250 more than in the previous year. Local grocers saw \$2.3 million of that spending, including \$423,500 at Rosauer’s Supermarket in Lewiston.

At corporate headquarters in Spokane, Washington, Rosauer’s Chief Operating Officer is Mike Shirts. How important are Food Stamps dollars to their operation? “Huge, obviously,” he says. “The proof is in the pudding. Twenty percent of the Food Stamps redeemed in the county is comparable to our market share. Certainly, we feel the sales swings, whether folks have money or not. It’s a big deal to us.”

The entire company has 2,100 employees. While Food Stamps receipts do not allow them to create more jobs, Shirts says, “It allows us to sustain our workforce.” He adds, “If those Food Stamps were to go away or are reduced, my guess would be some of those people would go on to some other kind of assistance, to the food bank, or kids would go hungry. It would convert to less revenue for us. Our workforce has a very direct relationship to what our sales are. As sales go up or down, we hire more or less. That would equate to about two percent of my workforce.”

Department spending helps people, and it has an upside for business, according to Idaho economist John Church. “This is not lost money. The spending is an investment. It goes back into the economy. If an employer came to town and spent this much money we would be elated. People need to remember that a big chunk of this is federal money which is a huge return on our taxes. This comes back and helps stimulate the economy and it helps people.”

Kurtz says, “Not only is the Department money a human investment, but it creates jobs and maintains healthy businesses. These dollars recycle numerous times in each community and help us keep the high quality of life we enjoy in Idaho. This is a wise use of taxpayer dollars because the money spent in the community often stays in the community. The dollars are spent again and again to help create jobs and an infrastructure that provides healthy and safe neighborhoods.”

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(**Editors:** Interviews are available on request. Contact Ross Mason at 334-0693 or Regional Director Dave Reynolds at 799-4338 for more information.)

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investment in every Idaho County
can be found online at
<http://www.healthandwelfare.idaho.gov>**